

A Multitude of Stories:

The Power of Short Story Collections to Disrupt “Single Stories”

“All of my friends seem to have different sets of experiences But one thing that most people have in common is an ability to say, even if only to themselves, where in the spectrum they fall at any particular moment.”

—Levithan & Merrell, 2006, unpaginated introduction

Levithan and Merrell (2006) inform readers that everyone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) has a unique story and set of life experiences. Alluding to an iconic symbol often appropriated by the LGBTQ community, they also assert that individuals can determine where they fit within the varied rainbow of what constitutes this community and that people’s identities can shift rather than remain static. These were understandings of which I was unaware during my adolescence as I struggled to accept and understand my own identity as a gay male.

While the publication of children’s and adolescent literature inclusive of LGBTQ characters continues to rise (Moller, 2014; Naidoo, 2012; Reynolds, 2011), the majority of titles continue to focus on particular ends of the spectrum rather than the greater diversity. For example, LGBTQ-inclusive texts may predominantly show gay, White, middle-class males as opposed to people of other races, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, or gender identities. In addition, characters in such texts might portray greater gender nonconformity or exaggerated characteristics than others. Thus, many adolescent readers may remain unable to see themselves in literature unless they are members of dominant cultural groups or align with stereotypical performances of gender nonconformity. This possibility is especially true when considering transgender-

inclusive literature.

Children’s and adolescent literature can provide a multiplicity of perspectives and identities through which and in which students may learn about others and themselves. It can serve as a “window,” helping young adult readers see and develop understandings of others’ realities, as well as provide a “mirror” in which adolescents may see reflections of themselves (Bishop, 1990, 1997). (More information about this brief essay, including source material, is available at <https://www.psdschools.org/webfm/8559>.) For this to occur, however, there must be a variety of representations available in the literature.

Facilitating conversations about sexual orientation and gender expression in classrooms is one way to create spaces that are more inclusive for all learners, and literature can be a powerful vehicle to promote such discussions (Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). However, LGBTQ-inclusive books do not often make their way into classrooms due to systemic or self-imposed censorship (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). In the instances when such books are shared with students, sometimes only one or two texts may be used in class discussions or be available on class or library bookshelves. Thus, these few texts become the sole representatives for the LGBTQ group, failing to depict varied and nuanced

identities and perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009; Bishop, 1997).

This article aims to build on ideas about how children's and adolescent literature can provide windows and mirrors and disrupt single stories through the affordances of short story collections that provide increasingly diverse perspectives within a single text. Questions guiding this introductory exploration include: 1) What multiple and overlapping identities exist within the LGBTQ, and specifically the transgender, community? 2) What authentic and accurate texts exist that portray these varied identities? 3) How can educators and young adult readers use the texts to showcase and explore the diversity within a particular cultural group? Not only does exploration of such questions help us rethink conceptualizations of normal and embrace differences, it also reinforces the understanding that there exist myriad ways to exhibit gender identity and that ideas of normality must be questioned.

Rather than seek to unpack LGBTQ-inclusive literature in lump sum (and thus run the risk of stereotyping, excluding groups, and further perpetuating single stories), this article honors the fact that within each group identified by those letters there exist both individuality and distinctness. One specific group that has been traditionally marginalized and stereotyped is the transgender community. This article begins by providing background information, such as terminology related to gender identity, and the theoretical framework guiding the explorations discussed herein. Transgender representations within media, including children's and adolescent literature, will then be discussed, along with the affordances of such literature and findings from analysis. Additional resources and ideas for educators are then provided, followed by implications of short story collections as tools to interrogate and combat single stories.

Building Background: Terminology, Windows, Mirrors, and Single Stories

Gender Identity Terminology and Considerations

When considering sexual orientation or gender identity, terminology can be new for some people, and terms sometimes evolve or change over time. Some educators may have a concern about which terms to use and wonder if they are using terms accurately and

respectfully. The definitions used within this article for words and phrases related to gender identity are borrowed from Kuklin (2014). Kuklin defines transgender as "a general term that refers to a person whose identity, expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth" (p. 178). Some transgender individuals identify as female to male (FTM). This would be a person assigned female at birth but who identifies as a male. Such individuals may also call themselves trans men. People assigned male at birth but who identify as female sometimes use the term male to female (MTF), or trans women. "Trans" is sometimes used as an inclusive term meant to represent a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. The term cisgender refers to a person whose gender performance and identity align with the gender assigned at birth. However, some individuals prefer terms other than those listed above, and some people prefer to think of identity as fluid. Labeling and categorizing people with terms can be precarious, and broad generalizations about any group of individuals should be avoided (Browne & Nash, 2010; Maguire, 2014). This article is informed by such realizations.

Educators may find the online glossary provided by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD; see references) a particularly helpful resource for terminology related to sexual orientation and gender identity. It is also important to note that there is a distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity. Being transgender relates to a person's gender identity (how one identifies and performs gender) and is not the same as a person's sexual orientation. Since this article explores transgender representation within literature, gender identity is the primary focus.

Theoretical Applications: Windows, Mirrors, and Single Stories

In her 2009 TED talk, Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about how she was both a victim and a culprit of single stories at different points of her life. Adichie explains that single stories are developed because of limited or nonexistent representations provided through literature, the media, or life experiences. Adichie asserts, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incom-

plete. They make one story become the only story” (para. 24). Tschida, Ryan, and Swenson Ticknor (2014) discuss how when the concepts of windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) and the dangers of the single story (Adichie, 2009) are brought together, they “stretch and reinforce each other in productive ways” and have a “recursive relationship” (p. 29). As will be shown further in this article, the lack of diversity within trans-inclusive children’s and adolescent literature may result in a lack of windows and mirrors to different identities and may thus perpetuate a single story. This has the potential to make it increasingly difficult for adolescents who are gender nonconforming or questioning their identities to further develop themselves and connect with literature.

Transgender Representations

In their depiction of trans-individuals, television shows like LOGOTV’s “RuPaul’s Drag Race” (Bailey, Barbato, Campbell, Corfe, Charles, Post, Salangsang, & Murray, 2009) and movies such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Penfold-Russell, Quin, & Elliott, 1994) depict adult male crossdressers donning heavy make-up, teased hair, and strong sarcasm.

While shows like Amazon’s “Transparent” (Soloway, Hsu, & Ganatra, 2014), Fox’s “Glee” (Murphy, Falchuk, Di Loreto, Brennan, Friend, Lerner, & Buecker, 2009), and news reports about Caitlyn Jenner make visible increasingly nuanced depictions, such media predominantly sensationalize trans-individuals and reflect particular cultural groups or stereotypes more than others.

In children’s and adolescent literature, 10 books were published in 2014 and 2015 featuring transgender youth (see Table 1). Similar to the limited diverse representations of transgender individuals in the media, the majority of these books showcase middle-class, White, MTFs. Only one book, *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (Andrews, 2014), depicts a FTM transition. This book is a companion to the MTF-inclusive novel, *Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition* (Hill, 2014), written by Andrews’s partner at the time. The books *Double Exposure* (Birdsall, 2014), *Alex as Well* (Brugman, 2014), and several other titles within the list are each fictional accounts written by adults.

Transgender-inclusive books for younger audiences include the picturebooks *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014), *Jacob’s New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman,

Table 1. Children’s and Adolescent Literature with Transgender Protagonists Published in 2014-2015

	Genre/Length Types of Visuals (if any)	Main Character’s Gender Identity	Race	SES
Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen (Andrews, 2014)	Memoir / 256 pp. Photographs	Female to Male	White	Middle class
Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (Baldacchino, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
Double Exposure (Birdsall, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 304 pp. No visuals	Intersex, Female	White	Middle class
Alex as Well (Brugman, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 224 pp. No visuals	Intersex, Female	White	Middle class
George (Gino, 2015)	Realistic Fiction / 240 pp. No visuals	Male to Female	White	Middle class
I Am Jazz (Herthel & Jennings, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition (Hill, 2014)	Memoir / 272 pp. Photographs	Male to Female	White	Middle class
Jacob’s New Dress (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp.	Male to Female	White	Middle class
But, I’m Not a Boy! (Leon, 2014)	Realistic fiction, picturebook / 32 pp. Illustrations	Male to Female	White	Middle class
Gracefully Grayson (Polonsky, 2014)	Realistic Fiction / 256 pp. No visuals	Male to Female	White	Middle class

2014), *But, I'm Not a Boy!* (Leon, 2014), and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014). *I Am Jazz* was coauthored by transgender teenager Jazz Jennings and an adult writer. *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) was written by parents describing the experiences of their son. Chapter books include *George* (Gino, 2015), the story of a gender non-conforming fourth grade student, and *Gracefully Grayson* (Polonsky, 2014), whose central character is in the sixth grade.

These books exemplify an increasing (and much needed) publication of children's and adolescent literature inclusive of transgender individuals, and such books are important to include within classroom libraries and discussions. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, they also predominantly reflect certain races and gender identities and thus run the risk of creating single stories based on who is, and is not, present in the literature.

Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2013) discuss interrupting White, male, LGBTQ-inclusive stories with narratives that include lesbians, people of color, or diverse family structures to illustrate "the ways that a whole variety of marginalized identities are interconnected" (p. 228) and that "there are people who have overlapping and multiple identities" (p. 228). A short story collection can contain a variety of individuals diverse in age, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and life experience.

One specific text breaks the cycle created by some of the other texts listed in Table 1, showcases diversity within the trans-community, and presents adolescents' voices. In the nonfiction collection of photo essays, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (Kuk-

lin, 2014), readers meet six transgender individuals through a collection of narratives that articulate each person's unique experience. Readers of this text may find that the diversity of stories provides windows and mirrors for various experiences and may be particularly beneficial for adolescents questioning their own gender identities. Jessy, one of the teenagers featured in Kuklin's book, expresses this sentiment as a youth questioning his gender identity: "I guess people had questions about me. I was questioning me, too. I wasn't sure what I was" (p. 6).

When the images in media and literature only portray single stories of certain stereotypes or dominant cultural groups (i.e., White MTFs), children and adolescents who question their gender identity may have difficulty finding reflections of themselves. They become unsure of who they are or who they might become. Short story collections, such as *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014), contain diverse narratives that provide students a variety of windows and mirrors for seeing transgender individuals (see Table 2).

To create *Beyond Magenta*, Kuklin met transgender teenagers through advocacy groups, such as the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center in New York City and Proud Theater in Madison, Wisconsin. In her author's note, Kuklin (2014) describes her process for selecting individuals to include within the book, stating, "It was important to find youths from wide-ranging ethnic, religious, and socio-economic circles so as not to mislabel 'transgender' as rich or poor, white or of color" (p. 166). Not only does Kuklin want to ensure that her book represents the diversity within the transgender community, but she implies that her readers are also a racially and socioeconomically

Table 2. Individuals featured in *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (Kuklin, 2014)

Character	Narrative Length	Visuals (if any)	Main Character's Gender Identity	Race	SES
Jessy	28 pp.	Photographs with face	Female to Male	Thai	Middle class
Christina	42 pp.	Photographs with face	Male to Female	Hispanic	Middle class
Mariah	20 pp.	No visuals	Female to Male	Biracial	Low income
Cameron	26 pp.	Photographs with face	Genderqueer	White	Middle class
Nat	26 pp.	Photographs with face	Intersex, Gender Neutral	White	Middle class
Luke	14 pp.	Photographs, face excluded	Female to Male	White	Middle class

diverse group.

Nikolajeva (2005) describes the implied reader as “the authors’ idea about their audience, the idea found in the text itself” (p. 247) and having “a particular age, gender, ethnicity, religion, politics, level of education, cultural background, and so on, which all affect the construction of the texts” (p. 253). Kuklin (2014) and each of the six transgender teenage writers in *Beyond Magenta* do not formally state who their target audience is. However, they appear to write with the intent that others may learn more about the transgender community and the diversity that exists within it. Mariah, one of the teenagers showcased in Kuklin’s (2014) book, states, “I want people to know what I went through. I want people going through the same things to know they are not alone. Transition? Everyone goes through one kind of transition or another. We go through transitions every day” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 91). Mariah alludes to several implied readers, including heterosexual readers who might learn more about what she went through, as well as readers who may be questioning their own gender identities. Mariah’s story coupled with the other narratives within this text demonstrate that not only are individuals diverse, but so are their experiences and the ways they confront obstacles in their lives.

Disrupting Single Stories: Content Analysis

Lo (2011) surveyed 371 young adult (YA) titles published during 1969–2011 regarding their representation of LGBTQ characters. She found that less than 1% of the books were LGBTQ-inclusive. Further interested in exploring trends in gender representation within these LGBTQ-inclusive books, Lo surveyed books published between 2000 and 2011 (see Figure 1).

Of these LGBTQ-inclusive books, 50% featured male protagonists, 25% featured female protagonists, and only 4% featured characters who identified as transgender or genderqueer. (The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN] describes genderqueer as a term used by people who identify their gender to be somewhere on the continuum in between or outside the binary gender system altogether. Genderqueer people may prefer gender-neutral pronouns.) Thus, the stories representative of the LGBTQ community most often reflected boys. This perpetuates a

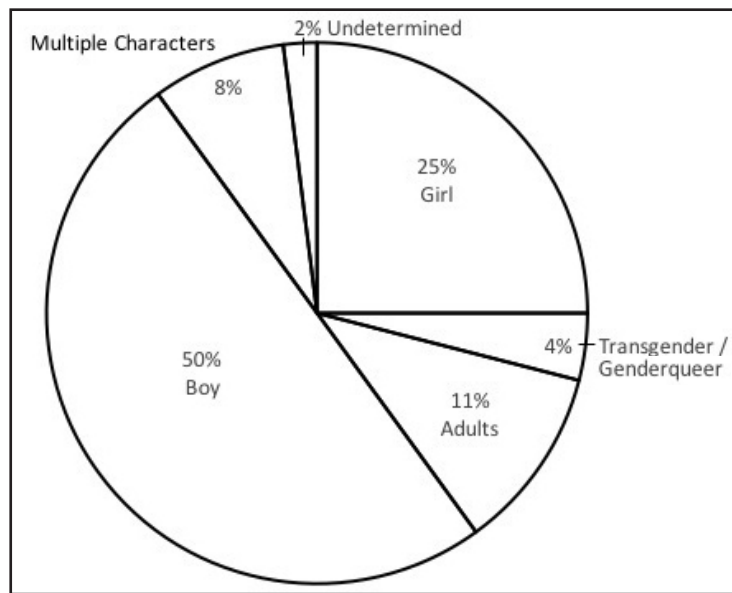


Figure 1. LGBTQ-inclusive YA Novels by Gender, 2000-2011 (Lo, 2011)

dominant narrative and a single story within children’s and adolescent literature. In a later study that focused solely on gender representation within LGBTQ young adult novels, Lo (2014) found that 75% of the texts included cisgender main characters, and the majority of these characters were male (see Figure 2).

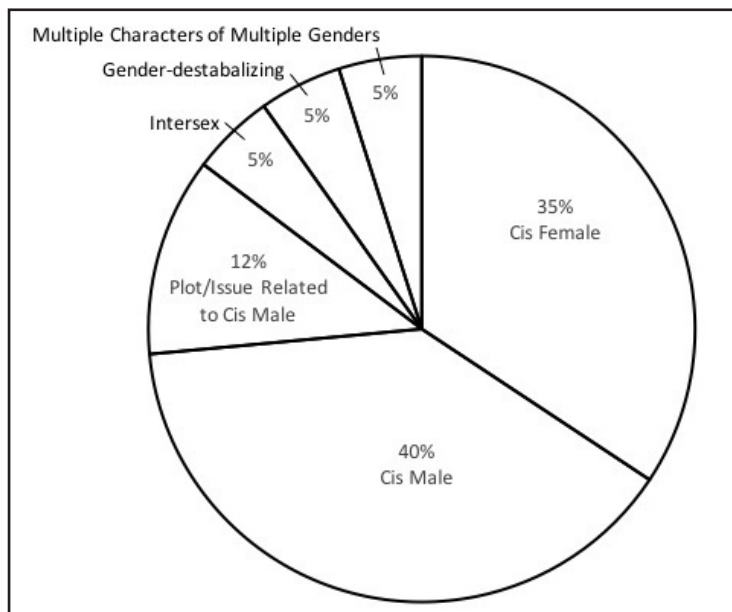


Figure 2. Main Character Gender Representation in 2014 LGBTQ-inclusive YA Novels (Lo, 2014)

[This] analysis sought to explore the racial, socioeconomic, and gender diversity within the texts as a demographic representation of whose lives are and are not visible within recent publications.

Intrigued by these results and wanting to further unpack the variation existing within those limited texts written about transgender individuals, I embarked on an introductory content analysis of recently published trans-inclusive children's and adolescent

literature. Table 1 (included earlier on p. 61) provides a survey of the ten children's and young adult books published in 2014 and 2015 (at the time this article was written) that were inclusive of transgender individuals. These texts were found using online searches through such sites as Amazon.com and the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database. I began by searching for titles of which I was already aware and then looked at suggested titles provided by the site based on that search. I also used keywords. In addition, I explored the websites for book awards pertaining to LGBTQ-themed children's and adolescent literature, including the Stonewall Awards presented by the American Library Association and the Lambda Literary Awards presented by the Lambda Literary Society.

Based on my research, the list in Table 1 contains all of the children's and adolescent books published during 2014 and 2015 with main characters who identify as transgender (as defined by Kuklin, 2014). Narrowing the search to titles published within 2014 and 2015 was done for several reasons. There appeared to be a rapid increase in the publication of trans-inclusive texts during these years compared to the past. In addition, books published prior to 2014 reflected the same trends as those found by both Lo and myself within the 2014 and 2015 publications. Narrowing the list to these two years ensured that this study would focus on the most recently published texts and that the corpus for analysis would be manageable.

Rather than focus this analysis on themes related to the experiences of the trans-individuals in the text and their commentary (which could have intriguing

results within a future study), this analysis sought to explore the racial, socioeconomic, and gender diversity within the texts as a demographic representation of whose lives are and are not visible within recent publications. As I read through each of the picture-books, novels, and short stories, I documented this information to compare the results. Such a study helps to reveal the need for increasingly diverse representations and the affordances provided by the short story collection.

All of the characters in the trans-inclusive books listed in Table 1 are White and middle class, and none of the titles depict transgender people of color. Nine of the ten books portray MTFs. The only book that depicts a counter-narrative of a FTM was written in conjunction with another novel portraying a MTF protagonist. These findings regarding gender representation and race within the transgender-inclusive children's and young adult literature published in 2014 and 2015 are consistent with Lo's (2011, 2014) analyses of LGBTQ-inclusive young adult texts.

However, an analysis of the collection of narratives in *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014) provided wider representation (see Table 2). Readers are introduced to Thai, Hispanic, Biracial, and White individuals who come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. While two of the individuals are MTF, the other four identify as FTM, intersex, genderqueer, or gender neutral. In addition to varying demographics, the stories represent myriad life experiences, such as each transgender teenager's relationships and levels of acceptance with family and friends, school support structures (or lack thereof), use of hormones, psychological aspects of the transition process, and personality as reflected through the narratives. The use of photographs adds another dimension of diversity since readers can visualize how each teenager performs gender identity. As collaborators in the publication of their own text, all of the teenagers worked with Kuklin to decide which photographs would be used and how much of their physical self they wished displayed through photographs and use of real names versus pseudonyms. Thus, diversity in individuals' comfort levels and preferences is also exhibited.

Cameron, one of the teenagers showcased in Kuklin's (2014) book, states:

Being trans is not something that is accurately portrayed in the media. So even if my dad had seen stories in the news,

they would not have included trans theory; they would not be all encompassing. And since there are so many ways to be trans, so much diversity within the trans community, he wouldn't have any idea about who I was. No. Anything about me had to be communicated by me. (pp. 112–113)

Through the six narratives in *Beyond Magenta*, readers are introduced to various identities and can garner an increasingly nuanced vision of the diversity that exists within the transgender community beyond the single stories of dominant groups portrayed in the media and other recent publications within children's and adolescent literature.

Short Story Collections and Ideas for Educators

There are a number of additional short story collections that provide diverse narratives and representations of race, age, socioeconomic class, gender identity, and gender performance. Although *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014) is the only adolescent text within this article (and of knowledge to the author) solely inclusive of trans individuals, the following nonfiction texts include trans narratives in addition to stories reflecting people who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

Similar to *Beyond Magenta*, another narrative collection entitled *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* (Levithan & Merrell, 2006) shares stories authored by young queer voices. While the majority of the entries are prose, others are written as poems, series of letters, or photo essays, adding genre variety as well.

Other texts, such as *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (Savage & Miller, 2012) and *The Letter Q: Queer Writers' Notes to Their Younger Selves* (Moon, 2012), are written by adults with adolescent readers in mind. Contributors to these collections include Jacqueline Woodson, Brian Selznick, Malinda Lo, Ellen DeGeneres, David Sedaris, and Chaz Bono among many others. *It Gets Better* (Savage & Miller, 2012) was written as part of the larger "It Gets Better" campaign and in conjunction with the Trevor Project as a way to combat suicide rates of queer youth. Contributions within this edited book are made by both allies and individuals who identify as LGBT, and stories span such topics as coming out, family and romantic relation-

ships, school and community lives, success beyond adolescence, and advocacy.

Although fictional, *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (Cart, 2009) includes works by a variety of authors depicting love, sexual orientation, and gender identity in a variety of ways. In particular, three stories within this collection share trans-experiences: "Trev"

by Jacqueline Woodson, "My Virtual World" by Francesca Lia Block, and "The Missing Person" by Jennifer Finney Boylan. Other fictional short story collections that include diverse sexual orientation representations (as opposed to gender identity or trans-narratives) are *How They Met and Other Stories* (Levithan, 2008) and *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence* (Bauer, 1994), reflecting the experiences of those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The latter book includes contributions from such authors as Jane Yolen, Lois Lowry, Gregory Maguire, Leslea Newman, Bruce Coville, and Francesca Lia Block. These texts, along with the others listed above, can help readers to rethink

conceptions of normality by disrupting single story representations and showcasing a wider diversity of the LGBTQ spectrum.

Educators may wish to have students read such collections of short stories to compare and contrast the individuals within the texts. Adolescents might be asked to construct Venn diagrams in which they find similarities and differences between themselves and individuals represented in the texts. Educators could have students conduct analyses that survey representations of race, gender, or socioeconomic class in the short story collections and compare their findings to representations they see on school bookshelves or in

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the media, paying particular attention to which representations are and are not visible.

Resources such as the intersectionality circle available on the University of Michigan's Student Life

Spectrum Center website (<https://spectrumcenter.umich.edu/article/new-identity-intersections-resources-our-website>) and the "Gender Unicorn" available from Trans Student Educational Resources (<http://www.transstudent.org/gender>) can be used by adolescents for analysis of themselves and/or the individuals in the texts as a way to consider various identities and

Short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* . . . provide multiple narratives that reflect the overlapping and nuanced identities within the LGBTQ community.

how those identities overlap and affect individuals; students can also critically explore which identities are present or absent in texts or other societal spaces.

Simply having such short story collections available in classrooms and libraries can be such an important first step in providing additional windows and mirrors that invite students to learn about others and to increase the likelihood that young adult readers who are gender nonconforming, LGBTQ, or questioning may see reflections of themselves, thus combating stereotypes of what it means to identify and exist as an LGBTQ individual.

Conclusion

This article sought to explore three questions: 1) What multiple and overlapping identities exist within the LGBTQ, and specifically the transgender, community? 2) What authentic and accurate texts exist that portray these varied identities? 3) How can educators and young adult readers use the texts to showcase and explore the diversity within a particular cultural group? Naidoo (2013) states, "With the ever-increasing population of queer children and queer families with children, now is the time for high-quality children's books representing this cultural group. Along with the need for more quality books, [. . .] additional studies are necessary to understand the collective content within queer children's literature" (p. 169). Although

an introductory study, it is my hope that this article has delved into such inquiry and contributed to the increasing body of scholarly work related to LGBTQ children's and adolescent literature, its affordances, and possibilities for the classroom, and that future studies and classroom explorations will continue to pursue its avenues of inquiry in greater depth.

Short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2014), along with the other titles described in this article, provide multiple narratives that reflect the overlapping and nuanced identities within the LGBTQ community. If educators only place one or two LGBTQ-inclusive books on their shelves or in classroom discussions, then these books become the sole voice of the LGBTQ population. Consider that the average length of a transgender-inclusive young adult chapter book published in 2014 and 2015 was 259 pages. Those 259 pages may become the single transgender story an adolescent reads. On the other hand, short story collections such as *Beyond Magenta* provide multiple narratives in 180 pages, with each narrative an average of 26 pages in length. Even if students only read two or three of the narratives rather than the text in its entirety, they have been afforded multiple perspectives and diverse representations.

As an adolescent who identified as a closeted gay male, I grappled with my identity and yearned to see representations in texts and media of others with whom I might find commonalities. Countless adolescents may have similar feelings. Ideally, educators and young adults will read widely so that they learn about a multitude of life experiences, but short story collections can serve as tools to make diverse stories increasingly accessible. The scope within such collections provides windows and mirrors for adolescent readers to see possibilities beyond single stories.

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